



CARE Ethiopia

A Decade of Program Learning Series Adolescent Girls' Empowerment

Adolescent girls are often the most vulnerable individuals in their societies and communities; gender indicators show that Ethiopian adolescent girls and young women continue to be the most vulnerable subset of youth. In Ethiopia, adolescent girls face a complex dynamic of limited choices and material resources - economic insecurity, lack of livelihood options, and little or no access to essential services. Prevailing social norms dictate the low social status of girls, leaving them with limited voice and agency over their sexuality and marriage outcomes. As a result girls in Ethiopia are highly vulnerable to child early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and sexual or gender-based violence, especially during the transitional period from childhood to early adolescence. The percent of Ethiopian girls in school drops significantly from 84 percent in primary to only 11 percent for secondary education.

CARE Ethiopia knows that adolescent girls hold great potential. Investing in them at key points in their lives and providing them with the necessary skills, resources, and competencies is vital if they are to realize their aspirations and lead lives of dignity, choice, and opportunity. For CARE Ethiopia this means ensuring that adolescent girls are empowered to equally access economic and social opportunities and services; and that Institutions (formal and informal) become more responsive to their needs and priorities.

How we approach adolescent girls empowerment

Recognizing the importance of adolescent girls' empowerment, CARE Ethiopia has invested in programming that aims to improve the health, education, economic, and social foundations that adolescent girls need to thrive and navigate healthy transitions to adulthood. Interventions have included a wide range of health, nutrition, education, gender, and economic empowerment themes.

A girl's ability to make positive choices and to have access to opportunities is most often linked to how others view her worth, her rights, and her future. Thus CARE's programming has also included engaging with boy peers and parents and the broader community to increase gender equitable attitudes, behaviors, and norms. Working with reference groups (religious leaders, husbands and mothers-in-law) has been equally important, for example mothers in law are often more influential in the perpetuation of negative social norms than husbands - especially in regard to a girl's sexual and reproductive health, mobility and schooling. CARE has also worked to increase responsiveness and access to high-quality services (public and private) for adolescents.

Different approaches are essential to catalyze change by challenging social norms and cultural barriers that constrain

Girls' Economic Empowerment

“At the start of the project, I was against my daughter saving and participating in VSLAs (Village Savings and Loan Associations) and the main reason was that I had limited resources to support her savings. But I am happy now as she is starting to support us, not only contributing to savings by growing vegetables, but also supporting me by getting a loan from her VSLA that has helped me to cover some urgent household needs.”

Abdiboru Project – mother of project participant.

Boys and men are learning from the adolescent girls in their lives.

“At the beginning of the project we were saying, ‘Where does this bad thing, this bad project, come from?’ However, our attitudes started to change after we started to witness the changes in the Abdiboru girls. We now believe girls have the right to decide their own fate, something that we never thought of before,” explained one boy during a focus group discussion in Chiro woreda, Beka kebele.

adolescent girls access to and control over assets and important decisions within their households and communities. CARE’s Village Savings and Loan Approach (VSLA), Social and Analysis and Action (SAA) and the Community Score Card® are key approaches and tools that have contributed to adolescent girls empowerment through CARE Ethiopia’s programming.

Investing in its own staff transformation through Gender Equity and Diversity (GED) trainings, instituting Gender Clubs and CARE’s SAA approach in particular, have been a critical elements to improving the CARE Ethiopia team’s understanding around and building support for adolescent girls empowerment – creating safe spaces and encouragement for self-reflection and dialogue.

CARE Ethiopia’s programming evidence has seen adolescent girls gain a greater sense of their own agency and knowledge of their rights. Girls have learned about sexual and reproductive health, nutrition, and gender-based violence. Girls have built life skills and developed leadership competencies, including how to communicate and negotiate – amplifying their voices. CARE has also seen increased literacy rates with girls staying in or returning to formal schooling.

Impactful programming. CARE Ethiopia’s TESFA Project, currently in its fourth phase, worked to improve economic and sexual and reproductive health outcomes for the highly marginalized population of child brides – married, divorced, and widowed adolescent girls – in the Amhara Region of Ethiopia. TESFA focused on facilitating positive changes in adolescent girls’ sexual and reproductive health and economic status. The project combined peer education within small group settings through CARE’s VSLA Approach to promote economic empowerment. Using CARE’s SAA Approach was critical to breaking down harmful social norms that were negatively impacting adolescent girls sexual and reproductive health and countering the harmful effects of child marriage. It also helped create social support systems for married girls. Key aspects of the SAA include: 1. Starting with Staff Transformation to ensure those facilitating community change processes have reflected on and challenged their own norms; 2. Conducting a norms barrier analysis at the start, which is critical for developing a strong curriculum; 3. Identifying reference groups (mothers-in-law,





“Attitudes are changing following the start of the Abdiboru project,” said one adolescent girl from Beka kebele of Chiro woreda. “These days, our parents are happy to hear us tell them about our aspirations to be influential women in our country. They have confirmed that they will let us decide when it’s time to get married.”

Adolescent girl project participant.

religious leaders and husbands); and 4. Ensuring groups are gender and reference specific and meet simultaneously (around the same time); this enables a safe space and also provides a platform at household level to talk about topics normally considered taboo.

Some of the positive outcomes have included: an increase in married girls using family planning methods, increased support from husbands and mothers-in-law to use family planning, and married girls being able to leave the house without permission (mobility) increased by more than 95%. There was also more than a 2x increase in girls who owned and controlled personal savings.

Similarly, CARE’s Abdiboru project focuses on strengthening girls’ empowerment, and VSLAs have been adapted to meet the needs of adolescent girls and ultimately improve their economic, health and social outcomes. In VSLAs, girls save together and take small loans to support their income generating activities or to cover their cash needs. In addition to the economic activities, the groups also provide a platform for training in sexual and reproductive health rights, life skills, and nutrition. Taking part in the VSLAs has taught girls how to generate income through small business opportunities such as goat and sheep rearing, poultry farming, vegetable trading and khat collection and packaging. Girls have also learned how to budget in order to build livelihood assets and use their savings to cover their clothing and education expenses. Most importantly they see a bright future for themselves, recognizing their value to their families, communities, and society overall and more girls feel empowered to reject

early marriage proposals. Evidence shows that VSLAs have empowered girls economically with positive multiplier effects impacting beyond girls themselves but also to their families and communities. With stronger financial literacy skills and economic empowerment, girls have helped alleviate the strains of poverty on their parents, and have built more financially stable futures for their own lives.

Engaging Men and Boys. CARE primarily works with young adolescent girls because they are the most constrained and threatened by structural determinants that consign them to low literacy, limited aspirations, early marriage, poor reproductive health and nutrition, and poverty. Despite this, many boys in rural Ethiopia also feel isolated and poorly treated. For example, in the Abdiboru project, boys did not understand why they were not invited to participate in the project, so they would sometimes disrupt the girls’ group meetings. Some boys even attacked project staff and community facilitators. The project adapted its strategies to be more deliberate in how it engaged with boys and parents by inviting them to take part in the SAA discussions and other dialogues around gender and social norms. The project also was consistent in its messaging about the project activities, its objectives and potential benefits for all; over time many boys and men grew less resentful and stopped being hostile and disruptive. Boys even began organizing themselves into boys’ groups, holding regular discussion sessions and saving money together.

Engaging reference groups. Parents, including mothers-in-law, and religious leaders in rural Ethiopia generally see no problem

with early marriage, as it is a longstanding tradition. Even local government officials can face strong resistance when enforcing laws prohibiting early and forced marriage. Using CARE's Social Analysis and Action approach with specific reference groups has been a key strategy in challenging harmful beliefs and social norms with promising results in attitudinal and behavior change. Parents have become more aware of the harms of early and forced marriage and are more respectful of girls' aspirations and decisions regarding marriage. Other community members (especially men) and boys are changing their attitudes and practices to be more equitable, recognizing that adolescent girls have the right to decide when and whom to marry, and harmful norms about food are starting to shift.

Improving access to and quality of services for adolescent girls. CARE Ethiopia has applied its versatile Community Score Card® Approach through its Adolescent Girl's Empowerment programming, by training Government partners and representatives in the approach and then orienting girls, community members (including parents) and government service providers. Key health and education issues affecting adolescent girls were discussed and prioritized - and both service providers and communities worked together to find solutions and make improvements. Some important examples include religious leaders teaching their congregants about the benefits of sending their daughters to school and banning early marriage proposals. Government ministries also revised some of their plans to address the interests of adolescent girls, such as the Education Office including a goal into their planning to improve girls' school attendance and improving school environment for menstrual health management.

The Spotlight: What we have learned

Agency, relations and structures – all 3!

- Developing girl's agency is important, whether fostering communication and negotiating skills, or raising awareness around economic opportunities, gender, health and legal rights. But individual capacity improvements alone do not necessarily lead to increases in gender equality. It also requires changing power relations and transforming structures. CARE Ethiopia is constantly pushing itself to deliver sufficiently transformative gender interventions, which not only take account of gendered conditions but also seek to change the very rules and
- systems that enable them to persist.
- Deliberate strategies and approaches to meaningfully engaging with boys and parents and other reference groups (as well as the wider community) are essential for fostering positive change in attitudes and support toward girls.
- Employing, documenting learning and evidence, and scaling gender transformative approaches such as SAA and Engaging Men and Boys (and other Power Holders) are important processes to achieving Gender Equality.

Investing in staff transformation.

- Creating safe spaces for reflection and dialogue (particularly SAA) has been a crucial ingredient to CARE Ethiopia staff personal transformation leading to deeper understanding about the harmful norms and barriers adolescent girls face and support for empowerment programming.

Adapting, combining and scaling successful approaches.

- Although typically used with adult populations, VSLA can work effectively with adolescent girls provided there is a safe and supportive environment.
- Providing entrepreneurship skill development combined with increasing access to finances through CARE's VSLA Model improves economic empowerment outcomes for adolescent girls and their families.
- An economic empowerment approach combined with social norms leads to greater impact. VSLAs provide a compelling platform for incorporating social norms approaches such as SAA. Challenging Social Norms takes time but important gains can be achieved quite quickly when combining these innovative approaches.
- Providing adolescent girls with quality information and services on sexual and reproductive health, how to save and invest money, and lessons on everything from how to care for a newborn to how to communicate in a relationship empowers girls economically, and improves their sexual health and knowledge and decision-making on family planning and reproductive decisions.

Want more information?

Please Contact

Esther Watts, Country Director, CARE Ethiopia

Email: Esther.Watts@care.org, Tel: +251116181775

CARE Ethiopia, Yeka Sub-city, Woreda 07,

House #671, P.O.Box 4710, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

To learn more about CARE Ethiopia's Adolescent Girls Empowerment work visit:

<https://www.care.org/work/health/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights/what-we-do/adolescent-health/abdiboru>

<https://prevention-collaborative.org/resource/cares-journey-piloting-social-norms-measures-for-gender-programming/>

<https://www.care.org/tesfa-brief>

<https://www.careaction.org/blog/how-married-girls-ethiopia-are-taking-charge-their-lives>

To learn more about CARE's work globally visit www.care.org.

